

Finding natural support in

by KAREN SAMPSON, M.A.

A child who can't seem to sit still during weekly worship services can become a distraction to other congregation members. Likewise, the adult who seems to have tuned out the sermon and is now looking around or thumbing rapidly through the hymnal can interrupt those near him by his activity.

Many families and individuals struggling with attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (AD/HD) are familiar with the frustrated sighs or disapproving looks they or their children may have received in these situations. While some individuals and families have decided to opt out of formal religious association rather than continue in an environment that doesn't take their abilities into consideration, many have looked for, and found, a faith community that is welcoming of them.

When a family does find a faith community, the strength and support family members find there can have a positive effect on their lives and in their journey with AD/HD.

Vivian Howie remembered how her faith helped her when her son, Ta'Quan, was first diagnosed with AD/HD.

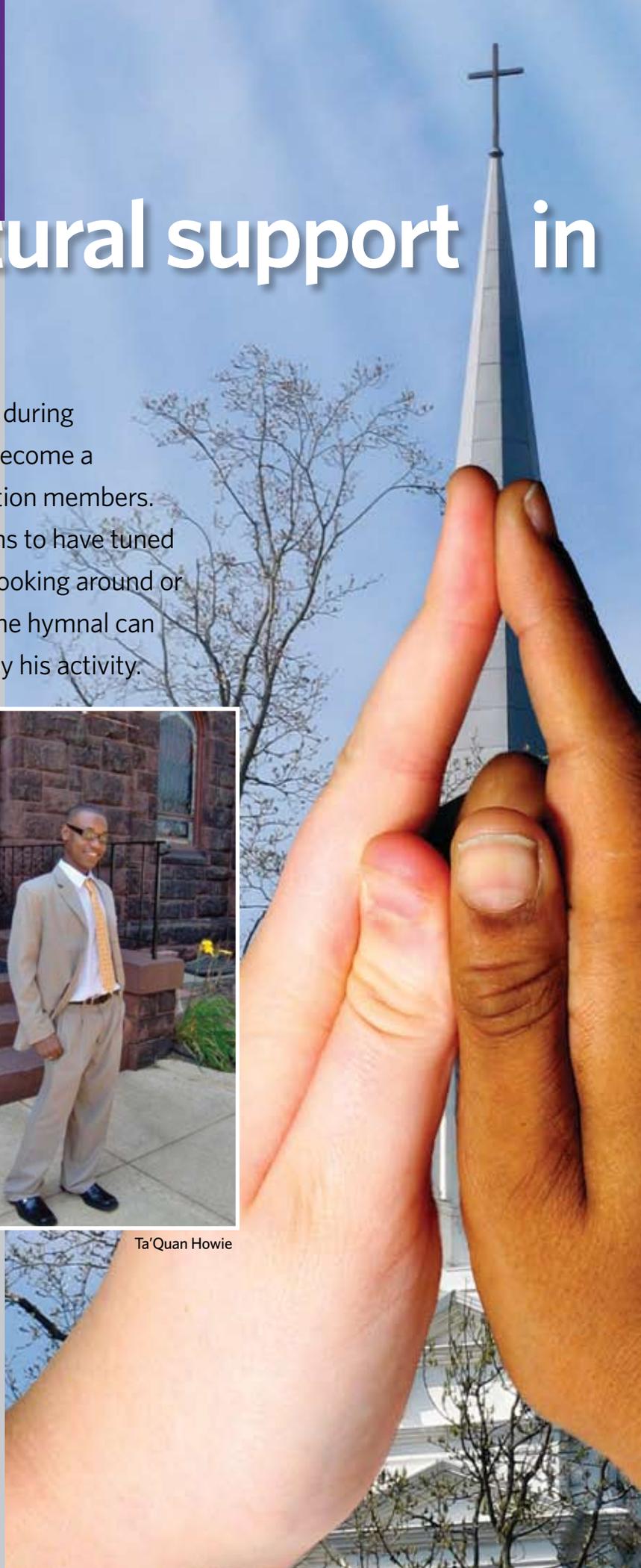
"I remember when I found out my son had the disorder, I prayed about it," she said. "And I prayed about the medicine, that it would work, not just for me to have less stress but that it would be successful for him."

Howie said she became a member of CHADD and the founder of the Washington, D.C., CHADD support group not long afterward. She and Ta'Quan are active in their church, Metropolitan Wesley AME Zion in Washington, D.C.

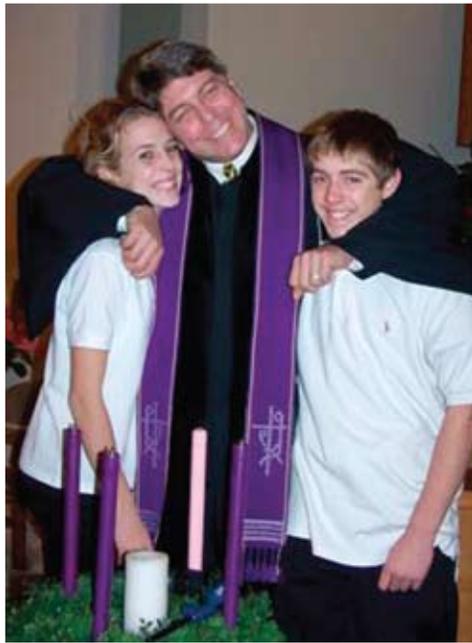
"Ta'Quan has been a fixture in our church community," Howie said. In some churches they attended,



Ta'Quan Howie



a Community of Faith



Rev. Jon Fregger, his daughter Erika, and his son Alex

“the teacher in the beginning thought he needed a spanking. That, of course, was a real challenge for me. Now that everybody knows [that Ta’Quan has AD/HD], and they understand, they are able to support him and me.”

A theology of disability

The Reverend Jon Fregger said he understands the frustration a parent who has a child with a disability faces in finding a supportive faith community. He

and his wife, Georgia, have three children, two of whom have AD/HD. Their church, Prince of Peace Presbyterian in Crofton, Maryland, is the religious home of several children and adults with AD/HD and other disabilities.

Fregger said his religious understanding of disabilities begins in the New Testament story of Jesus curing a man who had been born blind. Jesus’ followers had asked who was at fault that the man had a disability—the man or his parents? Neither is at fault, was the answer given.

“Nobody sinned,” Fregger said. “His position didn’t come through sin. When I read those words, that perhaps it’s even through our disabilities that we display God’s goodness, mercy and love.”

This “theology of disability” is the approach Fregger takes with his congregation.

“Our disabilities are a condition of our genetic make-up,” he said. “We are who we have been born to be. When we have a person with ADD, AD/HD, we minister with that person, not to that person, knowing what they are is part of who they are. You minister in ways that accommodate their life perspective. I believe they have these conditions because we are part of a broken

world. We are not in a perfect world. Even the troubling places in our lives can be ground where good things grow.”

The Prince of Peace community has made an effort to welcome families, individuals and children with varying levels of ability, Mrs. Fregger said. As the director of Christian Education for the church, she takes her young congregation members into account when planning for Sunday school.

“Even the curriculum we use talks about working with children with special needs,” she said. “We want the child in our Sunday school to come out with, ‘no matter my disability, God loves me and the people in this church love me.’”

“This is not a community that passes judgment,” she added. “You can pick out the adults who have attention deficit issues. People might get frustrated, but you learn how to live together.”

“It takes work,” Fregger said. “You have to be committed to being in community together.”

Making a difference

The support of a faith community can make a difference in a family’s life, along with their own personal faith. For Howie, the first few years following her son’s diagnosis were a learning experience for not just her family but for her congregation. Her faith and her congregation have been outstanding sources of support in her life, “in every way you can think of.” Adding that Ta’Quan is now 15, Howie said, “My son has grown up in the church. My pastor anoints Ta’Quan from time to time. He spends personal time with Ta’Quan, taking him out. At one time, no one invited Ta’Quan over to visit.”

Mrs. Fregger said it’s natural for parents to experience doubts and frustrations when they learn their children have AD/HD. Their children, Ryan, 15, Erika, 13, and Alex, 10, are active members of the Prince of Peace community and religious education classes.

SHUTTERSTOCK



FINDING A SUPPORTIVE FAITH COMMUNITY

Here are some helpful steps to follow in seeking a faith community.

- › **PLAN YOUR SEARCH.** Consider what you would like in a faith community before you open the telephone book, do a Web search, or gather flyers from locations around town. Make a list.
- › **DECIDE ON THE CHARACTERISTICS THAT ARE IMPORTANT TO YOU AND YOUR FAMILY.** What denomination or faith tradition? Structured or free-form in worship? Traditional or contemporary? What emphasis is important to your family?
- › **DO RESEARCH.** Read Web sites, literature on a faith tradition, spend some time at the local library. Talk with friends and family members about where they attend religious services. Many congregations have Web sites that detail their communities' missions and how they see themselves in the world; this is a good resource for your research.

After you've selected a few houses of worship that appeal to you, do some specific research on each one:

- › **ARRANGE MEETINGS WITH THE CONGREGATION LEADER.** Ask about his or her thoughts on AD/HD, along with the worldview of the faith tradition and house of worship.
- › **MEET WITH YOUTH AND ADULT GROUP LEADERS AND ASK ABOUT THEIR PROGRAMS.** Talk with them about what your family can bring to their programs and how familiar are they with AD/HD.
- › **ATTEND SERVICES AND MEET CONGREGATION MEMBERS.** Spend a little time talking with people informally during a coffee hour.
- › **AFTER A FEW VISITS, SIT DOWN AS A FAMILY AND GATHER ONE ANOTHER'S INPUT.** How welcome did each family member feel? How open was the faith community? Who did you meet there?

Weigh all of this in your head and heart. When you find a community you feel comfortable to be part of, you will know. But keep in mind, if one particular community doesn't meet your needs you can begin this process again. ♻

"For me, faith has been the faith community," she said. "We're all coming from the same place; we can support each other. We've had similar experiences. You throw our faith and belief in God into it and it's a big support. For me, there was a time when I was frustrated [because of her sons' AD/HD]. Then I started talking with other people I deeply respect and I realized it wasn't just me. I knew that my feelings weren't so far out there."

Mrs. Fregger said she, like Howie, spends time in prayer, seeking comfort and assistance when the challenges of caring for young people with AD/HD become difficult. She is often joined by women in her congregation in prayer groups.

"Knowing there are other people out there, other Christian mothers, dealing with this was huge for me," she said. "When you have a child with AD/HD, every day is a battle, a struggle. There was a time when I did ask what I did to deserve this. I did ask God, 'Why?' But I don't ask anymore because I have a different understanding."

Changing perspectives

The understanding of mental health disabilities, including AD/HD, has changed throughout recent years, as more and

more religious traditions understand disabilities as having organic causes rather than spiritual ones. The religious community as a whole is moving away from historical associations that attached various levels of stigma to mental health issues. More seminaries are offering courses in psychology and effective ways to pastorally counsel congregation members dealing with mental health issues like AD/HD in their families. Many denominations have counseling services available through their charitable organizations.

"Everybody is different, everybody is unique, everybody is special," said Rabbi Mayer Waxman of the National Jewish Council on Disabilities. The council is alternately known as Yachad, a Hebrew word that means "together." "Everyone has challenges," Waxman said. "We're all human, we're all the same when we come down to things."

In Jewish teaching, according to Waxman, a child with AD/HD or another disability is given to strong parents who are able to assist that young person in achieving her life's potentials.

"One of the strongest, most positive ways is the understanding that everything is in God's plan," he said. "If you look at things as God's plan, it helps you to develop in life

and grow. From a Jewish perspective, we look at it that God only challenges a person who is up to the challenge.”

AD/HD, like other mental health disorders, is not a condition that is present in a person’s or a family’s life because of a lack of faith; nor is it something that will disappear if one “prays harder,” Fregger said.

“I don’t imagine disability as a sinful condition,” he said, adding that mainstream Christian denominations do not teach that illness and disability are outward signs of inner failings but, rather, natural events that occur in human lives. “They have a lot to offer us. It’s a gift for us to see God from another perspective, to recognize God doesn’t just create people in one way.”

Finding a congregation

The Freggers and Howie said they are thankful for the medications that help their children in addition to active prayer and community lives. “We’ve seen the benefits of the medicines that work for our children,” Fregger said. Howie said joining CHADD



and sharing information on the disorder at Metropolitan Wesley has made an impact on her life.

“Everything I’ve done has been because of the AD/HD,” she said. “The support groups, the advocacy, working on my son’s self-esteem. Because of the relationship I have with God, I know the characteristics one must have if they’re maturing in Christ. I go back to who I am supposed to be as a person first and then as his mother.” →

**INTERNET RESOURCES:**

In addition to the Web sites of specific congregations, the following sites can be very helpful resources for families and individuals affected by AD/HD.

NAMI FaithNet

www.nami.org/faithnet

AD/HD of the Christian Kind

www.christianadhd.com

National Jewish Council for Disabilities

www.njcd.org

Finding a faith community in a person's spiritual tradition may be difficult at first, but the Freggers encourage individuals and families to continue looking until they find the right fit. Historic boundaries delineating the area served by a house of worship are disappearing, and families can attend various houses of worship before selecting a faith community. If a person or family is looking for a faith community to join, the Freggers suggest taking the time to meet the directors of religious education and the youth and young adult groups, to attend some of the activities, and to talk with congregation members before making a decision on a spiritual home. Community leaders are often available for appointments to meet prospective congregation members; take that opportunity to ask what their thoughts on AD/HD are before formally joining a faith community.

Sometimes when a person or family joins a new faith community there is a need to educate community leaders on AD/HD, and most are open to learning more about the issues affecting

their congregation members' lives. CHADD and the National Resource Center on AD/HD have many resources available to share with them. Information on the probable causes of AD/HD and the effectiveness of multimodal treatment can be downloaded or ordered through the CHADD Web site.

Faith community leaders can also be referred to these Web sites and others that address AD/HD from a religious and faith perspective. Many denominations also have statements relating to ministering with individuals of varying abilities on their Web sites or available from their central organization.

For Howie, being active in her church and connecting with God has made a difference in her life and her ability to raise Ta'Quan to be a successful young person. She said, "If I didn't have faith in the Lord, I would be exasperated, frustrated." ♣

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